DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 229 UD 028 720

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TITLE Asian-Americans and Student Organizations: Attitudes and Participation.
PUB DATE Apr 92
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 20-24, 1992).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Asian Americans; *Group Membership; Higher Education; Mail Surveys; Minority Groups; *Racial Attitudes; Racial Identification; Racial Relations; Social Life; *Student Attitudes; *Student Organizations; Student Participation; *Undergraduate Students; Vietnamese People

ABSTRACT

A study was done to assess the attitudes toward involvement of Asian American students in student organizations, particularly preprofessional groups because of their academic focus and to determine if any differences existed among Asian American groups in attitudes toward and involvement in student groups. The data were collected using a survey of a random sample of 152 undergraduate Asian American students from a large eastern university using a 30-item Likert-type mailed questionnaire. Results indicate that students tended to mix socially with White students and seldom felt isolated or out of things. Although they liked the idea of joining groups, many students did not perceive themselves as having time for groups. Although they agreed with participating in minority student groups, students disagreed with the idea of a preprofessional society made up of Asian Americans alone and more strongly disagreed with one made up exclusively of their ethnic subgroup. Students reported seldom using the minority student office or career development office. Men were more likely than women to agree that the university was supportive of minority students. United States born Asian American students were more likely to have close friends of other races and felt themselves more a part of campus life than did foreign-born Asian American students. In addition, those calling themselves Vietnamese Americans felt most isolated. Included are 4 tables and 17 references. (JB)

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Asian-Americans and Student Organizations: Attitudes and Participation

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Abstract

Respondents avoided groups made up of either Asian-Americans in general or of a subgroup of Asian-Americans. Vietnamese-Americans felt more isolated than other groups.

Over the past 20 years, the racial make up of students in higher education has changed significantly (Fleming, 1984). Yet, according to Olivas (1982), minority students in traditionally White colleges still find it difficult to adjust academically and socially to campus life. Many students from minority groups have reported that they have not felt welcome, and have been treated like uninvited guests in a strange land (Parker and Scott, 1985). The opportunities for them to participate in student organizations and campus life in general have not often appeared available.

Some research has focused on the needs of minority students, primarily Black students, on majority campuses (Sedlacek, 1987). However, Minatoya and Sedlacek (1983) found that the aspirations and expectations with which students enter a university may differ significantly by racial/ethnic group; therefore problems related to Black students may not be consistent with those experienced by Asian-American students.

Tracey, Leong, and Glidden (1986) found that unlike Caucasian students who were more likely to endorse emotional/social issues than academic and career issues as their presenting mental health problems, Asian-American students rarely endorsed these concerns. They appeared to be more concerned with academic and career issues, since these problem areas are more role salient for Asian-American students.

Their tendency to emphasize academic issues in contrast to social issues was further demonstrated in Mordkowitz and Ginsburg's (1986) case study. They concluded that Asian families tended to motivate achievement in their youth by various methods of strictly controlling homework, excusing the child from daily household chores, indicating high expectations and encouraging perseverance; whereas, the parents tended to de-emphasize verbal expression and socialization. Their subjects reported believing they would have had a less positive image of academic achievement, but more developed social skills if they had grown up in a White family.

Westbrook, Miyares, and Roberts (1978) found that ethnic identity was a more serious problem for Black students than for White students. Phinney and Alipuria (1987) showed that Blacks scored highest in the search for ethnic identity, followed by Mexican-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Whites. The result is consistent with Minatoya and Sedlacek's conclusion (1981) that although Asian-American students are less concerned with race than Blacks, they are concerned, in a less overt and direct manner. Leong (1986) concluded that Asian-American students have experienced social discomfort, for they are struggling between the informal and spontaneous nature of relationships in the U. S. culture and their own formal and traditional culture values. Atkinson, Maruyama, and Matsui (1978) indicated that among Asian-

American university students, Japanese-American students seem more acculturated than other Asian groups.

Sue and Sue (1987) noted that within-group differences (such as Korea-born Korean-Americans vs. U.S.-born Korean-Americans) on acculturation variables and characteristics may be as great or greater than between-group differences (such as Asian-Americans vs. Caucasians). The variations within and among ethnic groups of Asian-Americans suggest that each group may have different issues and needs. Making generalizations about Asian-Americans without considering subcultural differences can lead to faulty conclusions. Sue (1982) found that published studies tended to focus mainly on Japanese- and Chinese- Americans with minimal attention paid to the Indo-Chinese-, Korean-, Pacific Island-, and Philippine-Americans.

Loo and Rolison (1986) found that the lack of participation in campus organizations usually causes minority students to feel social/cultural alienation, which they think may adversely affect their social/emotional well-being and retention. Carr and Chittum (1979) also pointed out that students of all racial or ethnic backgrounds feel isolated when they have no organization of their own, and when there is little done to encourage their participation in campus life. Therefore, minority student organizations need to exist as an alternative to involvement in non-minority groups.

Fuertes, Sedlacek, and Westbrook (1989) found that it was particularly difficult for the Hispanic students to choose between general student organizations and those focused on Hispanic students. Student affairs professionals need more information on the ways Asian-American students relate to student groups and whether there are differences among Asian subgroups that are relevant.

The purpose of the study was to assess the attitudes toward involvement of Asian-American students in student organizations, particularly preprofessional groups because of their academic focus. An additional purpose was to determine if any differences existed among Asian groups on attitudes toward, and involvement in, student groups.

METHOD

Sample and Instrument

A random sample of 189 undergraduate Asian-American students from a large eastern university was mailed a 30 item questionnaire. Twenty nine of the items were in Likert format (agree, disagree where 1= strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Follow-up letters and phone calls resulted in an 80% return rate (n=152). A total of 430 Asian-American students were enrolled at the university. A sample of 200 was drawn from the central records office by a random sampling computer program. Eleven students were excluded as inappropriate for the sample. Students received a follow-up post card three days after

receiving the initial mailing, a letter two weeks later, and a maximum of two phone calls.

Questionnaires were anonymous and participants were asked to return a postcard containing their name, separately, at the same time they returned the anonymous questionnaire.

The questionnaire was developed from pilot study interviews with a sample of 20 Asian American students at the same university who were not included in the study. From these interviews and the literature, 30 items were selected. The validity of the questionnaire is content validity. Test-retest reliability over two weeks for an independent sample of 23 Asian-American students was estimated to be .78.

The sample consisted of 55% male and 45% female students. The mean age was 20.5. years. Sixty-nine percent lived off campus with their family, 18% lived on campus, 13% lived off campus with others and 10 % lived alone off campus. Twenty percent of the respondents were freshmen, 26% were sophomores, 25% were juniors, and 29% were seniors. Sixty percent majored in engineering, physical sciences, life science, or mathematics, 20% majored in arts, social sciences, or humanities, and 17% in business. Twenty-six percent were born in the U. S. (18% first generation, 7% second generation). The foreign-born students had been in the U. S. a mean of 11.2 years (range 2 to 22 years). The students chose ethnic identities as follows: 23% Korean-American, 20% Chinese-American, 20% Asian-American, 14%

Vietnamese-American, 7% Philippine-American and 5% American with the rest choosing other designations. Return rates were near 80% for all groups, hence sampling errors would be expected to be similar for each one.

Data were analyzed using Chi-square and multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) at the .05 significance level. Differences on student group participation, birth status, and among ethnic groups were examined. Percentages throughout this article may not add to 100 % due to rounding.

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations of the 29 Likert items and percent responses to one additional item are shown in Table 1 in the order presented to students. In general, students tended to like to mix socially with White students, and seldom felt isolated or out of things. They liked the idea of joining groups; yet, they usually didn't perceive themselves as having time for groups. They tended to agree with participating in minority student groups, however, they disagreed with a pre-professional society made up of Asian-Americans alone, and more strongly disagreed with one made up exclusively of their ethnic subgroup such as Korean-Americans or Vietnamese-Americans.

Asian-American students reported seldom using the minority student office or career development office. Twenty-nine percent of them indicated that the main function of a minority student

group was the promoting of cultural awareness; while 25% indicated ethnic identity, 22% indicated group support, 16% said provide social activities, 7% said provide academic support and 1% indicated promote political awareness.

Subgroup Differences

Men were more likely to agree that the university is supportive of minority students than women, and seniors were less likely than underclass students to feel this way. Birth status tended to differentiate items about socializing (see Table 2). The U.S.-born students were less inclined to like the idea of joining organizations made up exclusively of Asian-Americans or exclusively of an ethnic subgroup, such a Chinese-Americans, or Vietnamese-Americans. Also U.S.-born students were more likely to have close friends of other races and felt themselves more a part of campus life than did foreign-born students. However, there were no significant differences between U.S. and foreign-born students in their participation in Asian or general groups.

Table 3 shows the differences in attitudes by group participation. Students who joined in one or more Asian ethnic groups felt it more important to be member of an ethnic organization, and felt more comfortable making contributions to these groups. They tended to agree that associating with those of a familiar background was the good thing about joining an ethnic group. They felt more secure when they were with students of the same racial group, and consequently felt a part of campus life.

However, those who did not participate in any ethnic groups were more inclined to report that they didn't have time, didn't like the idea, and could not find any reason to join an ethnic group. Significant differences emerged when the multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to compare different ethnic subgroups. The biggest differences existed between those who called themselves Vietnamese-Americans versus Americans (Table 4). Vietnamese-Americans felt isolated among majority students, and felt left out while attending the University. Most of their close friends were from their racial group. However, those who identified themselves as Americans tended to feel the opposite of the Vietnamese-Americans.

DISCUSSION

As noted by Carr and Chittum (1979), Asian-American students' feelings of marginality are manifested through their participation in groups. Logically, birth status might be expected to be related to group participation and perceptions of social ability and university life. However, the U.S.-born students were not significantly more enthusiastic about joining groups. Regardless of the fact that they were significantly more confident of their social ability, they did not seem to seek social achievement through participation in either ethnic or general groups more than foreign-born students.

Asian-American students, in general, liked the idea of joining groups, and they believed there were important reasons

for participating in minority student groups. However, they were highly ambivalent about joining an ethnic preprofessional society regardless of whether they were born in the U.S. Several explanations are plausible. First, they may not have considered an 'ethnic' pre-professional society to be helpful academically; but they may have appreciated an ethnic group which provides opportunities for cultural awareness and group support. It is also possible that they did not trust an ethnic preprofessional society to teach them how to succeed in a career, and they might prefer to join a general one in order to become better informed about the profession. Another possible explanation is that students believed separate Asian groups isolated them from the larger community. Emotionally they valued their culture. However, in order to better adjust to the U. S. society, they preferred to mix socially with the majority. The ambivalence of Asian-American students toward ethnic pre-professional societies may partially explain this feelings of marginality.

Differences existed among ethnic subgroups as to how they perceived issues. This is particularly true for 'Americans' and 'Vietnamese-Americans'. Offices dealing with minority students may need to consider Vietnamese-Americans separately from other Asian groups. Vietnamese-Americans have been in the U.S. for a shorter period of time and have had to survive without help from those who have been in the U.S. longer. Generally, they were more likely to seek help from minority student services than

other Asian groups. However, Vietnamese-Americans liked to maintain their independence as much as possible. Research indicates that Asian students prefer a more directive approach in counseling. Vietnamese-Americans might prefer counseling focused on their group needs. Since U.S.-and foreign-born Asian-Americans differed on socializing but not on group participation rate, it might be good to promote activities that mix Asian-American students of different birth status to provide them with a chance to learn from each other, while sharing common socializing values.

More Asian-American students were interested in business than was reported by Minatoya and Sedlacek (1981). This indicates that Asian-American students and may be moving away from previous occupational choices and into new fields.

Limitations

The reader is reminded that this study was conducted at one campus and the results may not generalize to all other institutions. However, there was diversity in the Asian-American population at the university studied and others studies have indicated the campus environment to be similar to other large universities. Also, some of the Asian subgroups studied were quite small and should be examined in further research. Additionally, further research should be done exploring issues not covered in this study.

Overall, Asian-American students are a diverse group, sharing some common attitudes and perceptions but differing on others. Continuing research on their needs and interests can help us plan and execute optimal student service programs for them.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of 29 Likert Items* and Percentage Distribution of 1 Item

Items	Mean	SD
1. It is important to be a member of an ethnic organization such as an Asian-American student group.	3.14	.95
2. The University fosters respect for differences in cultural heritage.	3.40	.90
3. I feel that I have more problems in socializing than majority students do.	2.45	1.12
4. I feel comfortable making contributions to my ethnic student organization.	3.46	.79
5. It does not matter if there are any Asian-American faculty in my major at the University.	3.08	1.19
6. Most of my close friends are members of my racial group.	3.04	1.34
7. I would prefer that people think of me as a Chinese-American, Japanese-American, Korean-American, and so forth, rather than as an Asian-American.	3.27	1.25
8. I am interested in belonging to an organization which is made up of students in my major.	3.76	.89
9. For such a group mentioned in statement 8, I prefer that it be made up exclusively of Asian-American students.	2.16	.98
10. For such a group mentioned in statement 8, I prefer that it be made up exclusively of members of my racial group, such as Chinese-American students or Korean-American students.	2.04	1.01
11. I feel isolated among majority students.	2.20	1.02
12. I can not find any reason to participate in a minority student group.	2.62	1.06
13. The good thing about being involved in a student organization of my ethnic group is associating with those of a familiar background and culture.	3.79	.92
14. I am more confident of my academic ability than of my social ability.	3.07	.97
15. I usually don't have time for student organizations.	3.36	1.08
16. Ethnic/racial groups tend to segregate and isolate minority students.	3.30	1.09
17. I don't think I am a minority.	2.74	1.18
18. To join a student organization can enhance my problem solving ability.	3.14	.85

Table 1 continued

Items	Mean	SD
19. The University is supportive of minority students.	3.35	.86
20. I prefer not to mix socially with White students.	1.59	.74
21. I feel left out of things while attending the University because of race.	1.95	.97
22. I don't like the idea of joining groups.	2.20	.94
23. It is more important to join a majority student organization than a minority student organization.	2.39	.84
24. I often take advantage of the services provided by the Office of Minority Student Education.	2.12	.97
25. I don't know whether there is a Career Development Center on campus.	2.22	1.33
26. I feel more secure when I am with students of my racial group than with majority students.	2.65	1.15
27. The interracial climate on campus is hostile.	2.42	1.00
28. I enjoy participating in ethnic/racial programs and activities on campus.	3.33	.88
29. I feel I am a part of campus life.	3.37	1.00
30. Please indicate, in your opinion, what is the main function of a minority student group? (Please check one only)		
Promote political awareness. ---------- 1%		
Promote cultural awareness. ---------- 29%		
Maintain ethnic identity. ---------- 25%		
Provide group support. ---------- 22%		
Provide social activities. ---------- 16%		
Provide academic support. ---------- 7%		

Note * Based on a 5-point scale, 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree.

Table 2
Significant Differences in Attitudes by Birth Status *

Items	U. S.-born n=41		Foreign-Born n=111		Univariate F Value
	M	SD	M	SD	
6. Most of my close friends are members of my racial group.	2.37	1.26	3.30	1.28	15.39
9. For such a group mentioned in statement 8 I prefer that it be made up exclusively of Asian-Americans.	1.83	.89	2.28	.99	6.33
10. For such a group mentioned in statement 8 I prefer that it be made up exclusively of members of my racial group, such as Chinese-American students or Korean-American students.	1.71	.90	2.16	1.02	5.94
11. I feel isolated among majority students.	1.90	.95	2.32	1.03	4.98
14. I am more confident of my academic than of my social ability.	2.68	1.05	3.21	.91	8.28
21. I feel left out of things while attending the University because of race.	1.61	.83	2.07	.99	9.70
29. I feel I am a part of campus life.	3.76	.92	3.23	.99	6.91

Note * Based on a 5-point scale, 1= strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree. All items shown here are significant at .05 level using multivariate analysis of variance (Wilks Lamda = .68).

Table 3
Significant Differences By Participation in Asian Groups*

Items	No groups n=110		1 or more groups n=42		
	M	SD	M	SD	Univariate F Value
1. It is important to be a member of an ethnic organization such as an Asian-American student group.	2.91	.86	3.74	.91	25.75
4. I feel comfortable making contributions to my ethnic student organization.	3.22	.64	4.07	.84	43.49
6. Most of my friends are members of my racial group.	2.80	1.27	3.67	1.32	14.16
8. I am interested in belonging to an organization which is made up of students in my major.	3.67	.90	4.00	.83	6.17
12. I can not find any reason to participate in a minority student group.	2.86	.91	1.95	1.14	23.74
13. The good thing about being involved in a student organization of my ethnic group is associating with those of a familiar background and culture.	3.57	.88	4.36	.79	24.45
15. I usually don't have time for student organizations.	3.63	.98	2.67	1.03	23.92
22. I don't like the idea of joining groups.	2.44	.90	1.57	.70	28.13
26. I feel more secure when I am with students of my racial group than with majority students.	2.48	1.07	3.10	1.25	8.13
28. I enjoy participating in ethnic/racial programs and activities on campus.	3.07	.69	4.02	.95	42.15
29. I feel I am a part of campus life.	3.16	.97	3.93	.85	17.11

Note * Based on a 5-point scale, 1=strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree. All items shown here are significant at .05 level using multivariate analysis of variance (Wilks Lambda = .44)

Table 4

Significant Differences in Attitudes by Asian Groups*

Items	Americans n=8		Asian-Am n=31		Chinese-Am n=31		Korean-Am n=35		Philippine-Am n=11		Vietnamese-Am n=22		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	Univariate F Value
6.	1.50	.53	2.48	1.18	3.04	1.26	3.60	1.29	3.00	1.48	3.77	.97	7.37
7.	2.88	1.72	2.48	1.21	3.44	.89	3.94	1.16	3.40	1.35	3.36	1.22	5.27
11.	1.62	.92	2.00	.82	2.48	.98	2.06	1.03	1.64	.81	2.71	1.15	3.20
19.	3.00	.54	3.74	.68	3.19	.88	3.14	.85	3.73	.91	3.59	.67	3.53
20.	1.12	.35	1.32	.54	1.67	.68	1.60	.60	1.81	1.30	1.82	.79	3.20
21.	1.25	.46	1.71	.82	1.93	1.36	1.94	.84	1.70	.67	2.54	.80	5.28

Note * Based on a five point scale, 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree.

All items are significant at .05 level using multivariate analysis of variance (Wilks Lambda =.13).